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Précis on "Dickens and the Fiery Past: A Tale of Two Cities Reconsidered"

In his criticism titled "Dickens and the Fiery Past: A Tale of Two Cities Reconsidered," G Robert Strange claims that despite the plot-heavy technical weakness of *A Tale of Two Cities*, the novel profoundly reflects upon the French Revolution and revolutionizes readers' view upon history. Inspired greatly by Thomas Carlyle, the novel uses a higher moral position to reflect upon the pattern of resurrection in history, as Strange proves with Dickens's use of phrases like "in those days," (Dickens). Dickens exemplifies his main idea, the pattern of hopeful resurrection from brutal death, through Carton and his parallel, Darnay, mirroring France and her parallel, England. Strange claims the other parallels Dickens uses to connect the countries, such as the mobs and courts, are weak as they are too irrelevant to the plot and stand out. Strange claims the novel's dependency on plot as opposed to strong characterization weakens its tone, as Dickens must pause to paint detailed seemingly excessive illustrations as motifs for ideas, such as the wine shop. These scenes, while beautifully "picturesque" (Strange) and powerful symbols, break the novel's flow. Furthermore, the plot heavy nature limits Dickens's famous use of verbal comedy, forcing him to use, as Strange claims, "weak and few" (Strange) satirical remarks and descriptions. Strange concludes his criticism, however, by acknowledging Dickens intended purpose for *A Tale of Two Cities* as a theoretical reflection on history, not a fiction novel. Therefore, the technical weaknesses of "excessive artificiality" (Strange) are acceptable. In their

place, a deep psychological understanding, powerful imagery symbolism, and strong parallelism establish a profound reflection on revolution which influences historians even today.

I believe Strange is spot on in his description of the novel as a profound reflection upon history with a deep psychological understanding. I agree Dickens's use of satire, parallels, imagery, and symbolism encourage deep thought and question the very nature of society. While reading the book, I frequently found myself rethinking my own morals and ideas on how a society should be structured. These reflections were frequently spawned by the “picturesque” (Strange) scenes which Dickens can so wonderfully paint in readers’ minds. Furthermore, I agree that such excessive descriptions did break the flow of the novel at times; however, I disagree that this technically weakened the story as a whole. I believe Dickens's genius in structuring the plot of the novel, to where all characters’ threads intertwined, knotted, and were cut together in the end, more than make up for these breaks to paint symbolic scenes. To me, these moments actually contributed to the story’s flow, building up suspense as I waited anxiously for the next important plot element. For example, I immediately recognized the initial wine shop scene, with Stranger particularly criticises, as an allegory for blood the bloodshed to come. After reading the scene, I was more excited for the next plot development, which I now knew would be riveting and action-filled. I also disagree that Dickens’s satire was weak. I found myself laughing out loud at his satirical description of the guillotine as “the universal cure for headaches” (Dickens) and simultaneously reflecting upon the immoral abuse of the horrible death machine. Despite my disagreement, I do see the validity to Strangers argument. I believe one must read A Tale of Two Cities with the knowledge it is a theoretical reflection on history and must, therefore, interpret

each scene as such. A reader in the mindset of questioning history will find themselves just as captured by the plot as any other fiction novel read for entertainment purposes.

### Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. New York: Dover Publications, 1999. Print.

Stange, G. Robert. "Dickens and the Fiery Past: A Tale of Two Cities Reconsidered." *English Journal* (Oct. 1957): 381-390. Rpt. in *Literature Resource Center*. Detroit: Gale, 2016. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 2 Feb. 2016.